

Dealer Who Cited CIA Allegations Gets Life Term

'Freeway' Ricky Ross Sought Reversal, Saying Agency Was Involved in Cocaine to Aid Contras

By Amanda Covarrubias
Associated Press

SAN DIEGO, Nov. 20—A crack dealer who tried to get his drug conviction overturned by claiming the CIA was involved in cocaine dealing for the benefit of Nicaraguan contra rebels has been sentenced to life in prison.

"Freeway" Ricky Ross was convicted in March of buying 220 pounds of cocaine for \$169,000 from Oscar Danilo Blandon, a former narcotics trafficker and federal drug informant who sympathized with the contras.

Defense attorney Alan Fenster tried to use the issue of alleged CIA involvement in contra crack dealing during the 1980s as a reason U.S. District Judge Marilyn L. Huff should set aside Ross's conviction.

But the judge refused and on Tuesday handed down the life sentence, which was mandatory because of two prior convictions. Sentencing was originally set for Sept. 13, but the judge delayed it to study the CIA allegations.

"The conduct of Ross [and two accomplices] . . . is not excused by any so-called tenuous ties to the CIA," Huff said before the sentencing.

"It does not give them a free pass the rest of their lives to further addict people because of something that may have happened in the early 1980s."

Assistant U.S. Attorney L.J. O'Neale, who prosecuted Blandon and then used him to testify against Ross, said Tuesday there was no evidence of a CIA-drug connection.

"It's all been around for years, this supposed link. There never was any such link," O'Neale said.

Ross, 36, was arrested March 2, 1994, in suburban National City. The two accomplices also were convicted and were sentenced Tuesday to lesser terms.

Ross earned his nickname by selling drugs at interstate highway ramps in Los Angeles, then went on to build a coast-to-coast cocaine empire that sold more than half a million nuggets of crack a day.

"I said from the beginning I felt what I did was wrong," he told the judge Tuesday.

In a September hearing, Fenster cited a series of stories in the San Jose Mercury News as "compelling documentation" that the CIA was involved in drug trafficking by Nicaraguans.

The CIA has said it found no evidence to support the allegations. The Washington Post and other newspapers have published stories challenging the San Jose paper's conclusions.